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ABSTRACT

The Educational Testing Service Composition Scale was derived from a factor analysis of grades on 300 college freshman compositions, followed by further ratings using the scales with high school papers. This summary provides brief descriptions of the characteristics of student writing rated high, middle, and low on the eight subscales: ideas; organization; wording; flavor; usage and sentence structure; punctuation, capitals, abbreviations, and numbers; spelling; and handwriting and neatness. An addendum defines 31 common errors that may also be recorded in scoring student papers. (AA)

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DEFINITIONS OF RATINGS ON THE ETS COMPOSITION SCALE

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The ETS Composition Scale was derived from a factor analysis of grades on 300 college freshman compositions given by 53 distinguished readers in six different fields: 10 college English teachers, 9 social scientists, 8 natural scientists, 10 writers and editors, 9 lawyers, and 7 business executives. The factor analysis picked out five clusters of readers who agreed with one another and disagreed with other clusters to a greater extent than could happen by chance. The distinctive emphasis of each cluster was revealed by a tabulation of their comments under 55 headings. In all, 11,018 comments on 3,557 papers were tabulated and reduced to percentages of comments written by each reader so that readers who wrote the most comments would not unduly influence the interpretation.

It then became quite clear that the largest cluster (16 readers) was most influenced by the ideas expressed: their richness, soundness, clarity, development, and relevance to the topic and the writer's purpose. The next largest (13 readers) was most influenced by mechanics: the number of errors in usage, punctuation, and spelling. Seven of the ten English teachers stood high on this factor. The third (9 readers) showed the highest interest in organization and analysis. Four of the seven business executives stood high on this factor. The fourth (9 readers) stood highest in comments on wording and phrasing. The fifth (7 readers) emphasized style, individuality, interest, sincerity--the personal qualities of the writing, which we decided to call "flavor." The four readers who stood highest on this factor were all writers or editors.

When we asked for ratings on these factors and their main components in three large high schools over a period of one year and re-analyzed the ratings, the principal new finding was that, under the pressure of time and the teaching tradition, these five factors collapsed into two: a general factor and a distinct mechanics factor. The ratings that had the highest "loadings" on the general factor were, however, four of our five original factors: ideas, organization, wording, and flavor. These four factors had merged into one because at this stage they were highly correlated: if one was rated high, the other three tended to be rated high also. The main components of mechanics were similarly correlated with one another, but mechanics was not highly correlated with the general factor. While we might have settled for a single rating on each of these, we held out for separate ratings on the four main components of each to make the totals more reliable, hoping that in time some would emerge again as separate factors. Since we were now dealing with handwritten papers, the mechanics factor was broadened to include "handwriting, neatness."

In a subsequent workshop, teachers analyzed a large number of papers that had been rated high, middle, and low on these eight qualities and wrote brief descriptions of their common characteristics (reproduced on the next three pages). Ratings are recorded on 3 x 5 cards by encircling a number representing the scale position of the paper on each quality. In terms of percentages, 5 = the top 5%, 4 = the high fifth, 3 = the middle half, 2 = the low fifth, 1 = the lowest 5%. The midpoints of these intervals are approximately one standard deviation apart. Teachers have recently insisted on emphasizing the importance of ideas and organization by doubling the numbers representing each scale position; hence the numbers after these qualities are now 10, 8, 6, 4, and 2. The scale positions correspond roughly to grades of A, B, C, D, and E.

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I. GENERAL MERIT

1. Ideas

High. The student has given some thought to the topic and has written what he really thinks. He discusses each main point long enough to show clearly what he means. He supports each main point with arguments, examples, or details; he gives the reader some reason for believing it. His points are clearly related to the topic and to the main idea or impression he is trying to get across. No necessary points are overlooked and there is no padding.

Middle. The paper gives the impression that the student does not really believe what he is writing or does not fully understand what it means. He tries to guess what the teacher wants and writes what he thinks will get by. He does not explain his points very clearly or make them come alive to the reader. He writes what he thinks will sound good, not what he believes or knows.

Low. It is either hard to tell what points the student is trying to make or else they are so silly that he would have realized that they made no sense if he had only stopped to think. He is only trying to get something down on paper. He does not explain his points; he only writes them and then goes on to something else, or he repeats them in slightly different words. He does not bother to check his facts, and much of what he writes is obviously untrue. No one believes this sort of writing--not even the student who wrote it.

2. Organization

High. The paper starts at a good point, has a sense of movement, gets somewhere, and then stops. The paper has a plan that the reader can follow; he is never in doubt as to where he is or where he is going. Sometimes there is a little twist near the end that makes the paper come out in a way that the reader does not expect, but it seems quite logical. Main points are treated at greatest length or with greatest emphasis, others in proportion to their importance.

Middle. The organization of this paper is standardized and conventional. There is usually a one-paragraph introduction, three main points each treated in one paragraph, and a conclusion that often seems tacked on or forced. Some trivial points may be treated in greater detail than important points, and there is usually some dead wood that might better be cut out.

Low. This paper starts anywhere and never gets anywhere. The main points are not clearly separated from one another, and they come in a random order--as though the student had not given any thought to what he intended to say before he started to write. The paper seems to start in one direction, then another, then another, until the reader is lost.

3. Wording

High. The writer uses a sprinkling of uncommon words or of familiar words in an uncommon setting. He shows an interest in words and in putting them together in slightly unusual ways. Some of his experiments with words may not quite come off, but this is such a promising trait in a young writer that a few mistakes may be forgiven. For the most part he uses words correctly, but he also uses them with imagination.

Middle. The writer is addicted to tired old phrases and hackneyed expressions. If you left a blank in one of his sentences, almost anyone could guess what word he would use at that point. He does not stop to think how to say something; he just says it in the same way as everyone else. A writer may also get a middle rating on this quality if he overdoes his experiments with uncommon words: if he always uses a big word when a little word would serve his purpose better.

Low. The writer uses words so carelessly or inexactly that he gets far too many wrong. These are not intentional experiments with words in which failure may be forgiven; they represent groping for words and using them without regard to their fitness. A paper written entirely in a childish vocabulary may also get a low rating, even if no word is clearly wrong.

4. Flavor

High. The writing sounds like a person, not a committee. The writer seems quite sincere and candid, and he writes about something he knows--often from personal experience. You could not mistake this writing for the writing of anyone else. Although the writer may play different roles in different papers, he does not put on airs. He is brave enough to reveal himself just as he is.

Middle. The writer usually tries to appear better or wiser than he really is. He tends to write lofty sentiments and broad generalities. He does not put in the little homely details that show that he knows what he is talking about. His writing tries to sound impressive. Sometimes it is impersonal and correct but colorless, without personal feeling or imagination.

Low. The writer reveals himself well enough but without meaning to. His thoughts and feelings are those of an uneducated person who does not realize how bad they sound. His way of expressing himself differs from standard English, but it is not his personal style; it is the way uneducated people talk in his neighborhood. Sometimes the unconscious revelation is so touching that we are tempted to rate it high on flavor, but it deserves a high rating only if the effect is intentional.

II. MECHANICS

5. Usage, Sentence Structure

High. There are no vulgar or "illiterate" errors in usage by present standards of informal, written English, and there are very few errors in points that have been emphasized in class. The sentence structure is usually correct, even in varied and complicated sentence patterns.

Middle. There are a few serious errors in usage and several in points that have been emphasized in class but not enough to obscure meaning. The sentence structure is usually correct in the more familiar sentence patterns, but there are occasional errors in more complicated patterns, as in parallelism, subordination, consistency of tenses, reference of pronouns, etc.

Low. There are so many serious errors in usage and sentence structure that the paper is hard to understand.

6. Punctuation, Capitals, Abbreviations, Numbers

High. There are no serious violations of rules that have been taught--except slips of the pen. Note, however, that modern editors do not require commas after short introductory clauses, around nonrestrictive clauses, or between short coordinate clauses unless their omission leads to ambiguity or makes the sentence hard to read. Contractions are acceptable--often desirable.

Middle. There are several violations of rules that have been taught--as many as usually occur in the average paper.

Low. Basic punctuation is omitted or haphazard, resulting in fragments, run-on sentences, etc.

7. Spelling

High. Since this composition scale is most often used for test papers written in class when there is insufficient time to use the dictionary, spelling standards should be more lenient than for papers written at home. The high paper usually has not more than five misspellings, and these occur in words that are hard to spell. The spelling is consistent; words are not spelled correctly in one sentence and misspelled in another--unless the misspelling appears to be a slip of the pen. If a poor paper has no misspellings, it gets a high rating on spelling.

Middle. There are several spelling errors in hard words and a few violations of basic spelling rules but no more than one finds in the average paper. Note: Spelling standards differ so sharply from grade to grade and from one socio-economic level to another that each school would do well to make a distribution of spelling errors per hundred words (at least for test papers written in class) and relate its ratings to this distribution.

Low. There are so many spelling errors that they interfere with comprehension.

8. Handwriting, Neatness

High. The handwriting is clear, attractive, and well spaced, and the rules of manuscript form have been observed.

Middle. The handwriting is average in legibility and attractiveness. There may be a few violations of rules for manuscript form if there is evidence of some care for the appearance of the page.

Low. The paper is sloppy in appearance and difficult to read. It may be excellent in other respects and still get a low rating on this quality.

COMMON ERRORS CHECKLIST

1. Sentence fragment, incomplete sentence (if unintentional)
2. Comma splice, fused sentence (main clauses joined by comma or nothing)
3. Run-on or strung-together sentence (more than two main clauses unless they are short, of the same pattern, or separated by semicolons)
4. Carelessly omitted words and parts of words (especially endings)
5. Careless or needless repetition

6. Adjective for adverb and vice versa
7. Subject and object forms of six pronouns: me, us, him, her, and them are incorrect as subject forms except after "It's." Who at the beginning of a clause may serve as object, but whom as a subject form is incorrect. These object forms must be used after prepositions (especially between).
8. Possessive: omitted or misplaced apostrophe; her's, it's, your's, their's, and who's are incorrect; not uniformly required before -ing forms (see Evans)
9. Subject-verb agreement: careless or dialectal; after there; after compound subject with and or or.
10. Indefinites such as anyone, someone, everybody, each, either, neither, none take singular verb and following pronoun if meaning permits, but none and neither are often plural; infrequently both singular and plural follow as in "Everybody was there, and I was glad they were"; "If anyone calls, tell them to call back" (the latter to avoid "him or her").

11. Pronoun-antecedent agreement: two antecedents with and usually require plural; with or the pronoun agrees with the nearer; indefinites as noted above
12. Pronoun reference: what a pronoun refers to should be clear from structure, meaning, or context. It, this, that, and which sometimes refer to the whole preceding clause. Further references should keep the same pronoun: America should not be it, she, we, you, and they in the same paper.
13. Tense: wrong form, improper sequence, needless shift
14. Parallel structure: sentence elements having the same function should usually be parallel in form (not a clause, a gerund, an infinitive, etc. in a series)
15. Misplaced modifiers (especially dangling participles and only) should be counted as errors only if they appear to modify something they cannot logically modify, often with ludicrous effect.

16. Abbreviations: the safest rule is to avoid abbreviations in sentences except Mr., Mrs., Dr., St. (Saint), a.m., and p.m. Hon. and Rev. may be used only when the first name, initials, Mr., or Dr. precedes the surname.
17. Contractions are permissible in anything less formal than a dissertation.
18. Numbers: some publications now use figures for even small numbers such as 2 or 3, but most prefer writing out numbers in sentences unless more than two words are required, unless several numbers occur in the same sentence, and unless they are pages or divisions of a book, street numbers, dates, hour of the day if followed by a.m. or p.m., etc. A number like $10 million is now common. A number beginning a sentence must be written out.
19. Shall, will; should, would: use will and would regularly; should only in the sense of ought or in a conditional clause ("If he should come, call me"); shall infrequently to ask what a person wishes the speaker to do ("Shall I wait?") or (in the second and third person) to express determination ("They shall not pass!") In current American speech will occurs 217 times for every shall; would 9 times for every should. (But the traditional distinctions should not count as errors.)
20. Capitalize names of persons, places, languages, organizations, days, months, holidays; historical periods, events, and documents; titles before names; first word and all others except articles, prepositions, and conjunctions in titles of publications and themes; first word in every line of poetry (or as printed); first word in every sentence including quotations and inserted statements.

21. Comma: used less frequently now than even a few years ago. Regularly used after each item in a series and each of several modifiers of the same word except the last; after or around a direct address and an interjection not followed by an exclamation point; around appositives, parenthetical elements, and conjunctive adverbs (like however) within clauses; between contrasting elements ("It was Jane, not Mary"); and in place of an omitted word. It may be used after an initial subordinate clause, an initial long phrase, and an initial adverb (like hence or fortunately) that modifies the whole following clause; before a conjunction separating coordinate clauses; around subordinate clauses regarded as almost parenthetical; and infrequently to separate elements that might mislead if read together. If a sentence is clear without it, the comma is omitted.
22. Superfluous commas: separating subject and verb, verb and complement, adjective and noun, and words or phrases joined by a conjunction (except before the last item in a series); after a conjunction (but a comma may be used after an initial conjunctive adverb like indeed, furthermore, moreover, nevertheless, etc.)
23. Dash: to mark a sudden break in the thought, to set off a summary, or to set off a parenthetical element that is very abrupt or has commas within it.
24. Semicolon: between main clauses not joined by a conjunction; before a conjunction joining long main clauses that have commas within them; in a series like this one.
25. Colon: to direct attention to what follows: an appositive, a series, an explanation, or a quotation. It may separate main clauses if the second explains the first. Used after the salutation of a letter, after headings like those in this list, and in references to publications (between volume and pages, city and publisher)

26. Question mark after direct (not indirect) questions; sometimes after each part of a multiple question ("Did he go? find out? take any action? report?")
27. Apostrophe: possessives, omissions from contractions, plurals of letters, figures, and words spoken of as words (but not pros and cons)
28. Ellipses: three dots at the beginning of a sentence or within it to indicate omissions; four dots for an omission that ends a sentence
29. Quotation marks around direct quotations, titles of chapters or articles (not whole books or journals, which are underlined), words borrowed from others or used in a special sense. Single quotes around a quotation within a quotation. Periods and commas inside quotes, colons and semicolons outside; dash, question mark, and exclamation point inside when they apply to the quoted matter only, outside when they apply to the sentence as a whole.
30. Breaks within quotations are punctuated as follows:
"Your paper is full of errors," he said. "Correct it."
"Your paper is full of errors," he said; "correct it."
"Since your paper is full of errors," he said, "correct it."
(Original punctuation and capitalization at break follow said or equivalent.)

31. Diction: since most people have some mistaken or out-of-date prejudices against certain uses of words, the only safe rule when a student's use of a word seems questionable is to look it up in a source like A Dictionary of Contemporary American Usage by Bergen Evans and Cornelia Evans (New York: Random House, 1957). References in this list (see Evans) are to this source. Inclusion of the usage in Webster 3 means that it exists, not necessarily that it is acceptable.

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